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PP RUEHAST RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
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FM AMCONSUL MUMBAI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7084

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 8313

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 2026

RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 2271

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1817

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 MUMBAI 000147

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SMIG](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: THREE YEARS ON, RAJ THACKERAY'S PARTY STANDS NO CHANCE IN ITS FIRST LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

REF: A. MUMBAI 130

[1](#)B. MUMBAI 139

[1](#)C. 2008 MUMBAI 515, 513, AND 505

[1](#)D. 2008 MUMBAI 52 AND PREVIOUS

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[11.](#) (U) Summary: Founded in 2006 after a family succession dispute within the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, the charismatic Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) has made a colorful and troublesome appearance on the local political scene. After a disappointing first foray into local politics, Raj turned to the time-tested Sena practice of violent attacks on outsiders, in this case laborers and migrants from north India, especially the poor states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This campaign struck a chord among Marathi-speakers, and catapulted Raj and his party to the forefront of a national political controversy. The MNS had hoped to use these campaigns to attract the huge demographic of young and new voters. These expectations are likely to be disappointed in this election cycle, but efforts now will lay the groundwork for more realistic races in the state assembly elections which follow. The MNS will likely steal votes from the Sena, and could play the role of spoiler in several races. End summary.

MNS: A Break with the Sena?

[12.](#) (U) In March 2006, Raj Thackeray launched his new party, the MNS, after a well-publicized, acrimonious split with the party founded by his uncle Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena (reftel B). Raj was well-known in Sena circles as a hard-knuckled street fighter in the Sena style; he was also charismatic and inspiring in a way that reminded the Sena cadres of Bal. While many Sena activists hoped that Raj would take over the party after Bal's death or retirement, Bal chose his son Uddhav, a more retiring and reserved political figure. At a well-attended rally to launch his party in Shivaji Park, Mumbai's venerable political grounds, Raj sought to emphasize that his break with the Shiv Sena was a break with the Sena's ways, too. In its initial public posture, the party aimed to be more inclusive, and to welcome supporters from different castes, religions, languages, and age groups. Even the new MNS flag featured the three colors of the state's major political groupings: blue, representing Dalits; green, representing Muslims; and saffron, representing Hindus. Speaking at that rally, Raj pledged that MNS workers would protect women commuters on local trains, serve as a

back-up cadre for the overworked police force, and provide safety to senior citizens, electricity to farmers, and jobs to the youth. In short, he promised that the party would focus on "navnirman," or rebuilding. His appeal as a leader was clear, and media coverage was wide as well as favorable.

¶3. (SBU) Over the next two years, the MNS struggled to gain traction in the state's highly competitive politics. The party's first foray, the February 2007 Mumbai municipal elections, was disappointing. His party won only seven seats (out of 227) in Mumbai and a few in the key provincial city corporations of Thane (3), Nashik (12) and Pune (8). He failed to lure many supporters away from the Sena, and his still-thin leadership cadre and lack of solid party organization were apparent during the campaign. Many voters viewed his party as a personality cult devoid of significant ideological substance. Nor could it deliver the political jobs and resources that voters expect from their political involvement. Nitin Sardesai, the party's General Secretary, put a brave face on these results, reminding Congenoff that the MNS came in third place in these cities after only ten months of existence, something it takes many parties 20 years to accomplish. Overall, the MNS remains an essentially urban phenomenon, its appeal limited to the four largest cities of Maharashtra.

MNS Steals Thunder from Shiv Sena

¶4. (SBU) Two years after its founding, with the MNS struggling to be noticed, Raj Thackeray returned to the political forefront

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for very different reasons. In February 2008, Raj made a well-publicized, controversial speech denouncing the influx of laborers and migrants from north India, especially the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. (Note: Maharashtra's economy leads most other states in India, and Mumbai has long been a magnet for in-migration from poorer states and regions. End note.) Subsequently, clashes between MNS supporters and local activists from the Samajwadi Party (SP), a regional party from Uttar Pradesh that has tried to expand to some other parts of the country, led to street violence. Raj also criticized Bollywood's most celebrated film actor, Amitabh Bachchan, a native of Uttar Pradesh, for defending the presence of laborers and migrants from north India. These remarks, and Raj's subsequent brief arrest, prompted more outbreaks of violence against north Indian vendors and shopkeepers by MNS workers in Mumbai and other urban areas. (see reftel C and D) Fearing more violence, anecdotal evidence indicates that thousands of migrants left Tier II cities such as Pune and Nashik, leaving huge labor shortages in their wake. Locals report that MNS workers demanded that companies hire Marathi workers at a higher cost, taking a cut along the way to help fund the party.

¶5. (SBU) In August 2008, Raj revived the old Shiv Sena campaign demanding Marathi signboards for commercial establishments in Mumbai. In October 2008, MNS activists attacked 13 Railway Recruitment Board examination centers in suburban Mumbai and Thane, disrupting the exams and protesting "inadequate" representation of Maharashtra among the candidates. The Maharashtra Police again arrested Raj in October, and he was again released on bail. In the midst of the November 2008 terrorist attacks, the MNS drew ridicule when Raj's wife, Sharmila Thackeray, sent a mass short message service (SMS) which read, "All those who had lost their lives while saving this city are Marathis. MNS workers are busy donating blood, helping police for rescue operations and lifting bodies." In

fact, Raj and the MNS were mostly invisible throughout the crisis. Another SMS, widely circulated among north Indians, read, "Where is Raj Thackeray and his brave Sena? Tell him that commandos from Delhi have been sent to Mumbai to fight the terrorists so that (Thackeray) can sleep peacefully."

¶6. (SBU) While these political tactics were condemned by political observers in Mumbai and elsewhere in India, Raj's statements struck a chord among the Marathi-speaking communities in urban areas, especially where large numbers of north Indians had arrived to take jobs in the booming construction, transportation, and service industries. Raj's campaign impressed observers as a canny way to take the Marathi-pride issue from the Sena, who was at that time hoping to make inroads into the north Indian population to expand its vote bank. Many observers believed that Raj's campaign was covertly supported by the Congress, who hoped to diminish the Sena's influence and split its vote bank. This widely-believed assumption was supported by the ruling Congress/National Congress Party (NCP) coalition's "soft" approach to Raj's outbursts and violence from his workers.

Will the Real MNS Please Stand Up?

¶7. (SBU) MNS leaders acknowledge that street violence and theater is a faster way to build a new, energetic political base than the lofty language used at the party's launching. Sardesai, the MNS general secretary, maintains that the party's biggest following is among boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 35 who have lost faith in traditional political leaders. With 65 percent of India's future voters projected to be between 18 and 35, Sardesai sees the MNS's future in this demographic. According to Sardesai, many Indian politicians in their 70s and 80s still talk about the pre-Independence era, which to this demographic is shrouded in the "mists of history." In contrast, at a youthful 40 years old, Raj Thackeray focuses on issues dear to younger voters, such as development and unemployment. Sardesai claimed that youth in Maharashtra saw Raj as the only one who understood their problems. When pressed to enunciate MNS's development program, Sardesai said the party had experts working on a blueprint that he expected the MNS to roll out

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sometime before the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly elections in the fall of 2009. (Note: Raj Thackeray promised the same blueprint at the inaugural MNS rally in 2006. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) In explaining the party's use of violent, street politics, Sardesai insisted that the MNS has been "misunderstood." The party has never spoken ill of northerners, he claimed; rather, it has only asked that they respect the culture and language of Maharashtra. Mumbai is already overcrowded, and its creaking infrastructure is hard-pressed to handle migrants from underdeveloped states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who do not pay for utilities like water and electricity, he said. With no record of migrants' names and places of origin, Sardesai claimed migration was becoming a "breeding ground for terrorism." Sardesai also drew distinctions between the Shiv Sena and the MNS. While the Sena is closely associated with Hindutva (Hindu nationalism), the MNS does not believe in religion or caste, he added.

¶9. (SBU) According to Gaikwad, some politically active youth are gravitating to Raj Thackeray and the MNS, a development that

worries all four established parties in the state. Unlike the four big parties and their ossified structures, the MNS has no establishment or hierarchy, so that young workers can take on important roles quickly. The Shiv Sena District President in Raigad province told Congenoffs that many younger people have joined the MNS rather than the Shiv Sena, with the hope that should the two parties come together again in the future, these activists would be in a higher position than had they stayed with the Sena. Political commentators have also written that the MNS has opened up space for an ambitious, vast political class who could not find entry elsewhere. As the Hindustan Times wrote at the time of Raj's first arrest in February 2008, "Youth likes aggressive leaders, and he is one." In the context of the MNS strategy to attract young voters, then, MNS's strong arm antics of 2008 make sense: they help recruit cadres.

A Look at the Now, and the Future, Also

¶10. (SBU) The MNS plans to contest nine seats in Maharashtra for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, six in Mumbai and one each in Thane, Nashik and Pune. Political observers agreed that the MNS's political chances are slim, and it will not likely be competitive in any of these races. Maharashtra Times Metro Editor Sachin Parab did allow that while Raj Thackeray's charisma, name recognition and media savvy are beyond repute, he has largely neglected organization work. The MNS has no social base; one cannot identify any one group that is with the party. As Parab pointed out, the Shiv Sena had a higher profile image when it started out in the late 1960s, yet it took a long time for it to break out beyond its Mumbai base.

¶11. (SBU) However, the MNS's objectives for the current national elections appear limited. As journalist Nilu Damle told Congenoff, Raj has little to lose in the Lok Sabha polls and is using them only to position himself for an influential role in the state elections later this year. Damle said Raj's primary strength is his ability to present himself as a fresh alternative to the BJP/Shiv Sena and Congress/NCP coalitions that have traditionally vied for power in Maharashtra. Congress state assembly member Varsha Gaikwad told Congenoffs that the MNS will only cause discomfort to the Shiv Sena and its alliance partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in two of the Mumbai constituencies. Even Sardesai conceded that the MNS's objective for the Lok Sabha elections was simply to "make our presence felt." Bharat Raut, a Shiv Sena Member of Parliament's upper house, said that the MNS has the ability to be a Sena spoiler in five urban seats, but has little chance of winning a seat. The Sena has had difficulty marginalizing the MNS, Raut admitted.

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) The MNS, now a household name due to its well-publicized tactics, will not be a major factor in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. MNS does appear to be steeling itself for a fight in the state assembly elections, however, where it might gain some seats and prove more of a spoiler to Shiv Sena and BJP candidates. With the ailing 83-year-old Bal Thackeray in the background, it is unclear whether the split in the Thackeray clan is final. Once Bal dies, Raj could lead a fight to take back the Sena's leadership from Uddhav, possibly

with the support of the majority of the party's workers. Whichever scenario comes to pass, the Sena supremo's passing will leave a vacuum in Maharashtra politics, one the MNS and Raj Thackeray intends to fill. End Comment.

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